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# Soundscapes of Narco Silence in U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Performance

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Marci R. McMahon\*



Luz María Sánchez, *V.F(i)n\_1*, Gun-Shaped Speakers. Studio shoot. Mexico City, Mexico.

Photo by Cecilia Hurtado

Mexican artist Luz María Sánchez's series *detritus*—performed in both Mexico City and Houston, Texas (2011-13)—confronts viewers with over 10,000 altered images of narco violence from Mexican media. The images are abundant and projected for two seconds each on a large screen and do not include audible sounds. A viewer could stand in front of the projection for hours and not see the same image repeated. Sánchez's *detritus.2*, a follow up to the first installation, includes audio, specifically the sound of gunfire recorded by civilians; the audio complement for *detritus.2* exists as a separate installation titled *V.F(i)n\_1*. Through twenty portable digital speakers in the shape of guns, *detritus.2/ V.F(i)n\_1* produces the sounds of the shootings. The gun-shaped speakers, as Sánchez describes, “are completely autonomous—no power or sound cables attached—and each speaker is a sound component by itself. Once the battery is worn, the sound is gone until the battery is recharged, therefore restarting the process of *performance / sound – waste / silence*” (Sánchez 2015). Using guns as art objects, the installation renders the sounds of the narco state.<sup>[1]</sup> The gunfire replicates the sensory, traumatic experience of violence felt by those living in Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Since the drug war formally began under Felipe

Calderón's presidency in 2006, the lives of at least 80,000 people have been claimed, including over 27,000 disappearances. ("Mexico Drug War Fast Facts," 2017; "A Continued Humanitarian Crisis at the Border," 2015).

#### Video

Sánchez's description of the installation emphasizes the performative nature of sound: narco violence is performed through audible gunfire, while the fear and terror experienced by those impacted by the violence is performed through silence. The title *detritus* points to silence as waste, that is, people who have been impacted by narco violence daily have become numb to death and horror. The installation's focus on the performance, repetition and abundance of narco violence with intervals of waste/silence suggest the possibility of silence as a locus of transformation. The recharging of the battery represents the reloading of the gun and the persistence of violence in the narco state. Yet, as a symbolic intervention, the concept of recharging indicates that audiences have the ability to alter the cycle of violence by transforming silence from waste and numbness to a tactic of survival.

The notion of silence as a tactic of survival in the narco state has been offered by reporter John Gibler. He describes

narco silence refers not [to] the mere absence of talking, but rather the practice of not saying anything. You may talk as much as you like, as long as you avoid the facts. Newspaper headlines announce the daily death toll, but the articles will not tell you anything about who the dead were, who might have killed them or why. No detailed descriptions based on witness testimony. No investigation. (2011: 23)

Gibler points to the brutal killing of reporters in Mexico over the last decades, which has led reporters to be wary to report facts. His definition of narco silence suggests that silence is not always oppressive; for people living in the narco state, strategic silences can be central to survival.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, while we traditionally think of silences felt by marginalized communities as external, oppressive and disempowering, this essay emphasizes silences as internal, strategic, and purposeful.

Drawing on Gibler, I offer the concept "soundscape of narco silence" to capture how theater artists in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands tell the story of the drug war and its impact on residents in the region. By invoking narco silence as a soundscape, I assert the role of cultural performance in shaping sonic environments (Schafer 1993), underscoring agency even in the forced and brutal silencing encountered by those living in the narco state. For those living in the narco state, the soundscape of narco silence amplifies everything that is already there. There can be active and passive silences; both require active listening.

I analyze two recent performances created and produced in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands where the soundscape of narco silence is foundational: *Crawling with Monsters*, specifically productions at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) in Edinburg, Texas (2013 and 2017), directed by Eric Wiley,<sup>[3]</sup> and Tanya Saracho's play *El Nogalar*, specifically the

South Texas College (STC) Theatre production in McAllen, Texas (2013), directed by Joel Jason Rodriguez. Both pieces, written and created by Latina/o artists from the U.S.-Mexico border region in South Texas, were first performed in spaces geographically distant from the U.S.-Mexico border, suggesting the difficulty of producing such work in Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexico border. *Crawling with Monsters* was initially performed in Chicago, New Orleans, San Antonio, Houston and Austin, before its first public performance in the Texas-Mexico borderlands (2013) and updated performance in McAllen, Texas (2017).

*El Nogalar* was commissioned by Teatro Vista and produced at the Goodman Theater in Chicago (2011), with a West Coast premiere at the Fountain Theater in Los Angeles (2012). While the play's premiere productions speak to Saracho's location as a playwright in Chicago and the cultivation of professional Latina/o theater artists in these spaces, the play's initial productions indicate the fear of producing theater about the drug war in close proximity to the border. As Saracho has remarked: "It's [the drug war] not a story with no consequence. This is life and death stuff here on the border."

The productions of *Crawling with Monsters* and *El Nogalar* in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in South Texas—a region located approximately fifteen miles north of Reynosa, Mexico, a Mexican city that has been hard hit by drug violence in the last years—perform silences to communities either directly or indirectly impacted by narco violence. Audiences who attend STC and UTRGV Theatre productions are predominantly Latina/o, with a majority Mexican American and Mexicana/o demographic in the region. Many Latina/os in the RGV report having close relatives or friends who have been kidnapped by the *maña* (drug cartels), describe their fear of traveling to Mexico to visit loved ones, and relay stories of direct or indirect narco violence. Dinorah Guerra, psychotherapist and head of the Red Cross in Reynosa, comments on the psychological and physical toll: "There is a huge risk for people's self esteem. They cannot speak about what they have seen or what they have heard. [They] lose [themselves] and lose [their] identity" (qtd. in Penhaul 2010).

*Crawling with Monsters* is a docudrama performance comprised of character *testimonios*, digital media, and live music that stages the trauma experienced by children and families coping with narco violence. The artists developed *Crawling with Monsters* when the university ensemble, as a result of state travel restrictions, was no longer able to tour their successful production of the children's play *La lente maravillosa* (The Wonderful Lens) to elementary schools in Reynosa, Mexico. Drawn from interviews conducted by the ensemble, the performance is not plot-driven or composed with a traditional scenic structure, but is driven by oral testimony. Ensemble members come out in threes, and exit and enter, to allow for another set of ensemble members to come on stage; at times, all members appear on stage. Each actor, dressed in black on a dimly lit stage, conveys a *testimonio* that conveys the impact of narco violence in the border region and other Mexican cities. Behind each actor, is the age of the interviewee, along with digital projections that relay newspaper

headlines, data and statistics; these projections contrast with the personal experiences relayed in the *testimonios*. Interspersed throughout the *testimonios* is live music, particularly *mariachi* music performed by a vocalist and acoustic guitarist.



*Crawling with Monsters Now*, Rudder Forum, Texas A&M University, College Station, 2017.  
Photo: Staff photo, courtesy of Latino Theatre Initiative

*Crawling with Monsters* relays the terror in the borderlands region through character *testimonios* that convey the emotional trauma, silence and fear of narco violence, while digital projections emphasize and interrupt the soundscape of narco silence. In one chilling *testimonio*, audiences see footage of a classroom in Reynosa with children hiding under their desks; the scene includes a soundscape of gun shooting outside the school building. The sounds of gunfire in this moment magnify the violence experienced by children and families in the narco state. Amidst this violence, the actor's *testimonios* convey silence and fear. For example:

In Veracruz, one morning—last September—thirty-five dead bodies were dumped on a road during rush hour, twelve of them women. . . . I cannot tell you all that has happened in the past year in my city, but I would like to mention two people who were killed this past year. . . . One was a beloved professor at the university where I studied. . . . He was tortured and killed. . . . The other was a reporter also very well known and beloved in Xalapa. She investigated political corruption and was one of several reporters killed this year in Veracruz. . . . (Wiley 2010: 45)

In one moment, the actor-interviewee discloses the gruesome violence—“thirty-five dead bodies . . . dumped on a road during rush hour.” While in another moment, the actor’s speech slows down, pauses, and then remarks: “I cannot tell you all that has happened in the past year in my city.” Here, the actor’s *testimonio* conveys both the abundance of the violence (“there’s no way I can describe all of it”) and a reluctance to delve into it. After the actor pauses a few more times, she proceeds to focus on two people who were killed in the last year: one, a professor close to her, and the other, a reporter well known and embraced by the community. Both are public officials whose deaths have most likely been named, and so it is safe to mention the death of these two individuals. The actor’s *testimonio* underscores silence as not simply imposed from the outside, but as a strategy of survival. The silence of not naming the dead is necessary, for even the act of naming those killed via cartel violence could lead to a person’s death.

*Crawling with Monsters* uses musical genres inherent/organic to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands to capture the pain, fear and melancholy of the drug violence, particularly *mariachi* vocals and acoustic guitar interspersed throughout the *testimonies*. The 2017 production of *Crawling with Monsters* in Edinburg, Texas, for instance, included the popular ballad “La Llorona,” popularized by Mexican singer Chavela Vargas. Sung by a female actor on stage wearing black and sung toward the end of the performance, the lyrics and tempo capture the silence and suffering in the borderlands: “*Dicen que no tengo duelo, Llorona./Porque no me ven llorar./Dicen que no tengo duelo, Llorona./Porque no me ven llorar./Hay muertos que no hacen ruido, Llorona./Y es más grande su penar./Hay muertos que no hacen ruido, Llorona./Y es más grande su penar*” (“They say that I don’t have sorrow, because they don’t see me cry. The dead do not make any noise, but their pain is much greater”).

Accompanying the vocal performance is an acoustic guitar that conveys the melancholy of the song. La Llorona, a figure of fear and mourning in Mexican folklore who drowns her children, cries out and hollers for her lost children. The invocation of La Llorona emphasizes how Mexico, as a result of transnational policy and U.S. involvement, is symbolically drowning its children in violence. Here, La Llorona mourns in silence for her nation’s dying children.

The STC Theatre production of Tanya Saracho’s 2011 play *El Nogalar*, directed by Joel Jason Rodriguez, in McAllen, Texas (2013) incorporated and produced a soundscape of narco silence through textual silences in the script and soundtrack. The play follows an upper class Mexican family comprised of three generations of women (Maité, Valeria and Anita Galván), whose silences represent nostalgia for their privileged economic and social status, which is now dwindling in the new narco economy. Based on Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, the play follows the Galvanes as their land and home in the fictionalized estate of Los Nogales in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, and its adjacent *nogalar* (pecan orchard) are under threat by the *mañana*. The plot underscores how each woman’s ability to cope with the narco state is shaped by her different relationships and ties to home (both their estate and Mexico).

Centralized in the narrative are the Galvanes' workers—the family's former field worker Memo López and their current maid Dunia—who represent the marginalized in Mexican society. These characters use strategic silences to survive and ascend economically in the new class hierarchy generated by the drug trade.



STC Theater Production of *El Nogalar*. Photo by Miguel Salazar

Due to limited economic options in Mexican society, López works with the *maña*. The play follows his intentional silences as a form of survival in the narco state. López, in conversation with Dunia, defends “narco silence” as a strategy of survival:

DUNIA: Why are you the only one they leave alone, Memo?

LÓPEZ: . . .

DUNIA: All the men your age. Killed. Why Memo? (*Beat*).

LÓPEZ: Because I know when to keep my mouth shut which is not something I can say for you . . .

DUNIA: So that's all it takes to be best of friends with the Maña? That doesn't seem so hard to do?



López's defense of silence as a form of self-preservation indicates the soundscape of narco silence. Silences, he warns Dunia, are necessary to stay alive. Later scenes emphasize how narco silences enable López to survive and profit in the face of death within the new class hierarchy.<sup>[4]</sup> Later in the play, Dunia offers a poignant observation of how narco silences have enabled her community to cope with trauma and death: "We all just walk around like we're a movie on mute. *You can see people's mouths moving but all you hear is the static*" (my emphasis). Dunia's observation indicates the traumatizing effects of narco violence with silence as a trace of the trauma that is produced from narco violence.



STC Theater Production of *El Nogalar*. Photo by Miguel Salazar

The STC production included a soundtrack of *narcocorridos*, *rancheras*, and *nortec* (*norteño* + techno) that amplified narco silence as a facet of each character's response to the violence. Maité's scenes include several *rancheras*, including Lola Beltrán singing "Los Laureles" and Chavela Vargas's powerful rendition of "Que te vaya Bonito," indicating how, as part of the upper classes, she uses silence as a form of denial. With this song, lyrics and sonic affect stand in for what Maite is unable to vocalize. For instance, Beltrán's "Los Laureles"—a *canción* (song) *ranchera* that includes Beltrán's female vocals and *mariachi* orchestra instrumentation—conveys Maité's nostalgia, particularly her desire for an idealized Mexican society shaped by old racial/class hierarchies. Vargas's rendition of "Que te vaya Bonito," a song about love and abandonment, captures Maité's pain and suffering as she loses her home to the cartels. The singer Vargas's choking and sobbing voice, accompanied by a single guitar, conveys what Lorena Alvarado describes as "*un nudo en la garganta*," a



common expression in Spanish that describes “the knot in the throat, when one cannot speak because words will not come out, but the desperate, or quiet, breath of tears” (Alvarado 2010: 5). Yet, the sonic affect, combined with the narrative’s focus on Maité’s denial of the *narco cultura*, underscores how nostalgia does not allow her to critique her class privilege in Mexico, thus underscoring racial/class privilege as one element that shapes the soundscape of narco silence.

The production’s use of *narcocorridos*, or popular drug ballads that document the cross-border drug economy, further invoked the soundscape of narco silence. Many argue that the *narcocorridos* enable those in Mexican society, as Jorge Castañeda, author of *El Narco: La Guerra Fallida*, explains, “to come to terms with the world around them, and drug violence is a big part of that world. The songs are born out of a traditional Mexican cynicism: This is our reality, we’ve gotten used to it” (qtd. in Kun 2010). The first sounds we hear in the play are two acoustic guitars and an electric bass from the *narcocorrido* “El Carril Número Tres” by Los Cuates de Sinaloa. “El Carril Número Tres” tells the story of a secret “lane number three” (enabled by a deal with the CIA and DEA) used by a Mexican drug lord to freely go back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico. The lyrics’ focus on the U.S. government’s involvement in the drug trade introduces audiences to how silences north of the U.S.-Mexico border perpetuate narco violence.

With *nortec*, a fusion of *norteño*, electronic and hip-hop, the production’s soundtrack underscored the Mexican government’s complicity with the narcos. The track “Mexico” by the Mexican Institute of Sound, for instance, focused audiences’ attention on the Mexican government’s collusion with violence and terror. With the lyrics “green like weed, white like cocaine, red your blood” (referencing the Mexican flag) and “at the sound of the roar of the cannon” (alluding to the national anthem), the song evokes the soundscape of violence that terrorize Mexican residents. With its charged critique of government corruption, “Mexico” momentarily interrupts the soundscape of narco silence rendered in the play script and rest of the soundtrack. The soundscapes of narco silence in this moment calls attention to government structures that allow for the violence, thereby implicating audiences as social actors in the politics of the drug war that continues to devastate Mexican society.

With soundscapes attuned to the silence and fear experienced by residents in the U.S.-Mexico border region, *Crawling with Monsters* and *El Nogalar* invite audiences to listen attentively and more collectively to the soundscape of narco silence. As Sánchez’s *detritus* installation that opened this essay indicates, such soundscapes have the potential to affect audiences differently. For audiences not directly impacted by the drug war, the sounds of gunfire in Sánchez’s installation carry the potential to aurally assault the listener and place them as victims of violence; the end result could be charging such audiences as agents of change, especially as they are forced to confront the violence. For those who live amidst the narco state, the sound of gunfire has the potential to force everyday Mexicans into re-living

trauma they may not be prepared to confront. Yet, Sánchez describes how the goal with *detritus* is to help families affected by narco violence, particularly by making “their stories visible—out of the anonymous data—and visibility could empower them” (2015).

The overwhelming sounds in *Crawling with Monsters* and *El Nogalar* are not gunfire, but silences that have the potential to amp up the physical violence and trauma experienced by those in the narco state. Since silence is fundamental to the functioning of the narco state, theatre productions that engage with narco silence have the potential to interrupt one of its power foundations. Silences only register, however, if you can hear them. As the drug war continues to devastate not only the borderlands region, but across Mexico, theatre productions that seek to break the soundscape of narco violence are necessary now more than ever.

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[1] I label Mexico a “narco state” to describe how drug war violence has impacted all sectors of Mexico’s political life, including the army, police, politicians and government officials. In doing so, I do not absolve the U.S. in its role in the drug wars across Latin America.

[2] Social justice responses to narco violence in Mexican society have also included strategic silences, such as the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, which included silent marches by tens of thousands of people in Mexico, as well as silent marches to commemorate the deaths and disappearance of the forty-three students from Ayotzinapa, Mexico.

[3] *Crawling with Monsters* was first created and produced from 2010-13. The 2016-17 production of *Crawling with Monsters* is titled *Crawling with Monsters Now*. It is an updated version of the piece with new character interviews due to new actors in the ensemble and updated newspaper headlines.

[4] Narco trafficking and trade has provided many disenfranchised Mexican men with opportunities they would otherwise not have in a Mexican economy devastated by neoliberal economic policies. As Reporter Cecilia Ballí explains: “The worst casualties of this ‘civil war’ were the estimated 7 million young men to whom society had closed all doors, leaving them the options of joining a drug gang or of enlisting in the military, both of which assured imprisonment or death” (2012).

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